

The Actor's Symposium

Dear Student Directors,

Congratulations on being selected to direct a one-act for the symposium. It's a wonderful role that carries a lot of responsibility. The following packet is offered as a guideline to help you prepare to direct your play. The kind of play you've chosen will determine in large part how you approach it.

If, for example, you picked a realistic clear-cut play that has some depth to it, the exercises in this packet will prove invaluable – even if the ten minute format means that the answers are fairly easy to flesh out.

If you pick an abstract piece, it will probably make more sense to focus on Who the characters are and What they want, What obstacles are in the way that create conflict, Where and When the play takes place, and Why you want the audience to experience this particular piece (your concept).

So take a look inside and see if it provides the guidance you need to help you through the director's process. And know that your faculty mentor is here to help you whenever you need it.

Have fun!

Directing a One Act Play

The director should have a distinct vision of the play that he/she wants to direct so that she/he can pull all the elements of production (the actors, crew, set, sound, music, lights, publicity, etc.) together to bring that vision to life. How does the director go about forming and strengthening that vision?

The Director's Process

Someone once said that analyzing a play is like taking an onion and peeling back layer upon layer, each time revealing a fresher and deeper layer of understanding. For most full-length plays, this process can take considerable time. For the 10-Minute format, the analysis is usually much more straight-forward. The basic questions you use to get to that deeper layer of meaning, however, are essentially the same: Who, What, When, Where, Why. (Rehearsals will reveal the How.)

The process outlined below will guide you through the preliminary steps for gaining a good grasp of your play. The clearer your understanding and vision, the more effective your leadership will be as the director.

- I. The Director's Pre-Rehearsal Prep Work – Letting the Text Guide You
 - A. Basic Script Analysis
 - B. Basic Character Analysis
 - C. Scoring the Script for Beats
 - D. Ground Plan
 - E. Pre-Blocking
 - F. Drawing up the Rehearsal Schedule – Mr. Raposa will discuss this with you.
 - G. Preparing your Rehearsal Expectations - "
- II. Rehearsals
 - A. First Rehearsal: Expectations/Contracts/Rehearsal Schedule; Read throughs; Ice-breaker game
 - B. Second Rehearsal: Table Work with the Actors – script and character analysis, helping them to explore
 - C. Blocking Rehearsals: Getting the play up on its feet
 - D. Working Rehearsals: Marrying intentions with actions
 - E. Polishing Rehearsals: Getting the flow and timing down
 - F. Technical Rehearsals
 - G. Dress Rehearsals
- III. Symposium & Performance



The Director's Pre-Rehearsal Prep Work

A) Basic Script Analysis

- Read through the play once without interruption. Note your first impressions – this is usually what the audience will experience. What is the tone or mood of the play? What colors come to mind? What is the play's essential rhythm? Does it change?
 - Read through it again and this time focus on the characters and their relationships, noticing how they change throughout the story.
 - Read through the play once for each character in the play, reading it *from that character's point of view*. This can be hugely revealing.
- Now you are ready to turn to the following questions about the given circumstances. Let these help you to further unlock the script:

The action of the scene

1. What happens in this play? Try to summarize the essential action in one sentence.
2. What is the inciting incident that sets the rest of the play in motion?
3. What other moments in the play serve to further ratchet up the tension?
4. What is the climax of the play?
5. How are things different at the end of the play than at the beginning?

The characters in the scene

1. In twenty words or less, describe each character:
2. What is the basic relationship between the characters? For instance, are they lovers? Parent-and-child? Business associates? Classmates? Total strangers? Master-and-servant? Etc. Do they get along with one another?

3. How are the characters involved with what happens? In other words, who drives the action? Who is in control (who has the power) at each moment of the play – does this fluctuate or change?

Who profits/loses/changes the most as a result?

The main conflict in the play

1. **What** does each character want (**super-objective**) and **why** does he/she want it (**motivation**)? (One sentence per character.)

2. What **obstacles** keep each character from accomplishing his/her goal immediately? (One sentence per character.)

3. What is each character willing to do to get what he/she wants (**action**)? (One sentence for each character.)

The style of the play

1. What is the dominant mood of the play (relates to **genre**)? Be as specific as possible. Some samples: hilarious, hateful, frightening, silly, mystifying, cerebral, anxiety-producing, surreal, poetic, dark, romantic, etc.

Would you consider this, then, a comedy, drama, tragedy, other (be specific)?

2. **Where** and **when** does the action occur? Deal first with the map-and-clock reality, if possible (month? day? year? room? city? state?): ie. “It happens on June 6, 1942, in a hospital room in San Diego, California.”

Then deal with socio-psychological time and place – what significant event has happened and what is the next impending event? Whose turf is it?: ie. “It happens immediately after their divorce but just before the birth of their child, and it occurs on her turf.”

3. How is the world of the play like the real world?

4. How is the world of the play different from the real world?

Many of these questions come from the excellent appendix of Play It Again! by Norman A. Bert and Deb Bert; Meriwether Publishing Ltd., Colorado Springs, 1993.

B) Basic Character Analysis

[Suggestion: answer the following for each of the characters. Then during your initial rehearsal table work with your actors, feel free to use the same questions. You could, for example, use Part A above as discussion questions after you've read through the play a couple of times together. Then you could have each actor work on “A Treasure Hunt” and “Bone Structure of My Character” below on his/her own, each focusing solely on his/her own character.]
You've already begun to piece together each character when you identified his/her given circumstances & objectives in part A. Now let's get deeper under their skins to find out what makes each of them tick. From the point of view of one character at a time, apply the following questions – you'd be amazed at how this methodical exercise brings characters into focus (although some scripts offer more information than others):

A Treasure Hunt: Combing the Script for Clues

Take a separate piece of paper and divide the whole thing into four columns. Put the following titles at the top of each:

Column 1: **what your character says** about him/herself

Column 2: **what other characters say** about your character

Column 3: **what your character's actions** reveal about him/herself

Column 4: **what the stage directions** say about your character.

Column One: Go through the play, literally line by line. **Every time your character speaks, does he/she say something about herself?** If so,

a) Record each statement verbatim in quotations. Skip nothing; make a **complete** list.

b) Then, after each quotation, indicate whether your statement about yourself was one of the following: correct, mistaken, or lying.

Examples:

Felix to Oscar in "The Odd Couple"

"...I felt guilty. Emotionally, I'm still tied to Frances and the kids." -truthful

Margaret to Harriet in "Overtones"

"My life is blissful and complete." - lying: she doesn't want Harriet to know her life is falling apart.

Column Two: **What do other characters say about your character?** Put their exact words in quotations. Again, for each statement, indicate whether you think the speaker is correct, is mistaken, or is lying.

Example:

John: "Janie has such exquisite taste in clothes!" -lying, earlier he told Todd that her taste was atrocious.

John: "I think she suspects something is up." -true

Column Three: **What does your character actually do in this scene**, and what do these actions reveal about you?

Example:

I don't really answer his questions. I side-step them. I think I am afraid to let him get close to me.

Column Four: **What do the stage directions say about your character?**

Example:

"George enters in his underwear, half-asleep, obviously suffering from a hang-over."

Bone Structure of My Character

Character name:

See how many of these you can answer, looking to the play for all your answers. Then you might put in parenthesis any answers that you make up. Write "N/A" if you think it's really not pertinent.

Physiology

1. Sex: 5. Posture:
2. Age: 6. Appearance:
3. Height & Weight: (same as you or not?) 7. Defects:
8. Walk (same or different? Describe it.):
4. Color of hair, eyes, skin: 9. Sexual Orientation:

Sociology

1. Class: 6. Religion:
2. Occupation: 7. Race, nationality:
3. Education: 8. Place in community:
4. Home life: 9. Political affiliations:
5. I. Q. 10. Amusements, hobbies:

Psychology

1. Sex life, moral standards:
2. Personal premise, ambitions (if my character lived by a motto, what would it be?):
3. Frustrations, chief disappointments:
4. Temperament:
5. Attitude towards life:
6. Complexes, obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, manias, phobias:
7. Extrovert, introvert, ambivert:
8. Abilities, talents:
9. Other Qualities:

C) Scoring the Script for the Major Beats

Time to go through the script and mark (in pencil!) the places where one moment shifts into another. When, why and how does the energy shift?

Technically, a beat is the smallest division of action in a play. The length of time necessary for a character to play a tactic or intention from beginning to end, before trying a new tactic. (ie. “to reprimand” or “to sweet-talk” or “to beg”)

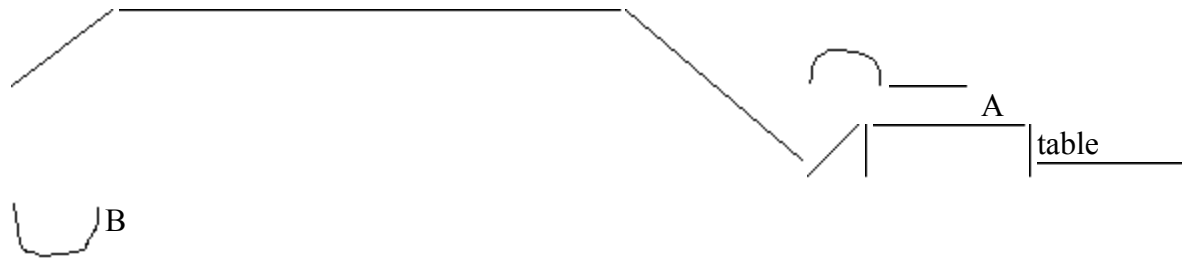
Focus on identifying the main beat changes so you'll get a good sense of the topography of your play. A beat changes: *whenever someone enters or exits, a character gets a new idea and changes the subject, a character finds a new tactic to pursue his/her objective, an emotional change is indicated; or something else changes the chemistry in the setting – like the phone rings, an alarm goes off, the lights go out, etc.*

Identifying beat changes becomes very helpful when blocking the play. A beat change usually means some kind of physical movement or adjustment is called for. Just be sure to do this in pencil, as you will probably change your mind about some of these.

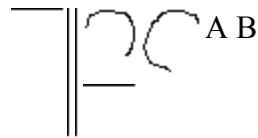
D) Ground Plan

Here are some things to consider as you create and evaluate your ground plan:

1. Where is the audience in relation to your set?
2. How many entrances and exits do you need, and where are they? Are they located so that they maximize the effect of important entrances or exits? Upstage-center doors, for instance, make it difficult for actors to exit without turning their backs on the audience.
3. Where is the furniture? (Remember that you will be using blocks to suggest actual furniture.) Where are important props such as telephones, etc.? Is your set cluttered with unnecessary furniture/blocks? Is the furniture arranged so that it shares the play with the audience? The following arrangement, for instance, will make it difficult for the audience to see the face of an actor in chair B and may hide an actor in chair A behind the downstage actor:



Rearrange the set like this:



or like this:



E) Pre-Blocking Your Play

The fact is, every director has a different approach to blocking and sometimes whether or not to pre-block depends on the kind of play, itself. At the very least, you'll want to figure out where the characters enter and exit, and you might want to have a good idea of what the pivotal moments in the play look like – your major stage pictures. One way to do this is by playing around with game board pieces on your ground plan rendering. Other directors like to draw sketches of what these moments might look like.

Another option is to pre-block the whole play (noting movement/positions in pencil in your script). You can then ask the actors to pencil in your blocking as though it were simply a good starting point. Nothing is written in stone (or ink!). Their job at this point is to see if they can make your blocking work: to fill your blocking with their intentions. It will quickly become apparent if what you've envisioned works or doesn't work for them. Then you can all set about finding better, more motivated blocking for those places where it doesn't work.

Just be sure to encourage them to try different blocking and make sure you remain open to movement and business that you had not thought of. Often, it is much better than what you had

planned. Whenever you can incorporate the actors' ideas (without compromising the overall plan), do so. The more creativity they can have in the process, the more connected they will feel to their characters and the action. (If an actor doesn't like your idea, ask him/her to try both your way and his/her way, and then you chose what works best. The director has the final say.) Yet a third option is to pre-block the play without showing it just yet to the actors, let them play around with their own ideas for a week, go back and incorporate some of their discoveries into your blocking, and then block the play with them using the newly revised blocking. Just be sure to tell them you are using this approach and let them know that you are watching them during that early phase to see what they create, but that your blocking might ultimately be quite different in places.

Tips for Blocking your Play (most of which you already know)

Golden Rules:

1. Every member of the audience must be able to see and hear every vital action and reaction of every character in the scene.
2. Every movement an actor makes onstage must be motivated: The character must have a reason for moving.
3. Don't sit or stand in one place or one position for too long, if you can help it. Use your beat changes to shift to another position.
4. Move on your line, not during someone else's.

General Guidelines for Movement and Positions on a proscenium stage:

1. UR is considered a stronger entrance position than UL.
2. Any C position (UC, C, DC) is strong onstage (receives the greatest attention from the audience) with DC generally considered the strongest area, especially when only one or two actors appear onstage.
3. "When the character you play makes a strong statement, comes to a crucial decision, feels a powerful emotion, a strong movement is frequently appropriate and effective. Movements toward the audience are traditionally considered more emphatic than movements away from the audience; movements toward the center more emphatic than movements away from the center.
4. Rising is usually considered a stronger, more emphatic movement than sitting down."

-Pp.333-334, The Young Actor's Workbook, Judith Roberts Seto, Grove Press, NY, 1979

Getting the Actors to React to the other character(s) in a scene:

Here's an excerpt from acclaimed directors Frank Hauser and Russell Reich, from pages 35 and 59 of their book Notes on Directing, Walker & Co., NY, 2003:

1. Ask: Is it nice or nasty? Big or little?

If [his] line is "What a pretty sister you have," do you take that as nice or nasty? If it's nice, you tend to move toward [him], however slightly. If it's nasty, you move away. If you don't move at all, you're dead.

How nice? How nasty? Big or little? [Let that dictate how much you move.] The sum of all your reactions is your character.

...

2. If it moves, the eye will follow. The audience will look at whichever actor or object is moving.



Word of advice: The steps outlined above are provided as a guideline, giving you an organized approach to the director's job of analyzing a script and preparing yourself (and your actors) for a fruitful rehearsal process. Again, depending on the script you've chosen, some of these tools will be more helpful than others. No doubt you will come up with some of your own techniques along the way. You are free to pick and choose whatever works for you. Just remember that your faculty mentor is here to offer guidance, whenever you need it. Trust your instincts and welcome the creativity of those around you. Have fun!